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## Literature review : using humor with children

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## Literature review : using humor with children

### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore and review the literature on humor, particularly as it relates to interactions with children. Often adults, whether they are parents or teachers, devalue the use of humor in dealing with children. Research supports that humor is a beneficial component of social interactions, especially with children. Studies have shown that children are receptive to humor beginning at very young ages, and that their sense of humor is developed and finely tuned as they mature. Findings show that by using humor in social situations, stress levels can be de-escalated, defensive reactions are reduced-- which in turn helps curtail acting-out behaviors in the classroom, personal interactions become more prevalent, and positive cognitive learning takes place. In conclusion, humor can be beneficial in interacting with children. Humor helps to foster their self-esteem, enhance cognitive learning, and develop problem-solving skills.

LITERATURE REVIEW: USING HUMOR WITH CHILDREN

A RESEARCH PAPER  
PRESENTED AS PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
FOR THE MASTER'S DEGREE IN  
GENERAL EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

BY  
CAROL J. ASWEGEN THORNHILL  
AUGUST 2002

This paper is dedicated in loving memory of my parents,  
Ruby Ann Tegtmeier Fletcher and LaVerne Dallas Fletcher.  
They are deeply missed for their guidance, support, and wisdom.

It is also dedicated to my children,  
Brian James Aswegen, Ondrea Lynne Aswegen Holmes,  
and Michael Robert Aswegen. They have challenged me  
(both negatively and positively) during the entire process.

Finally, I wish to encourage my grandchildren,  
Devon Lee Martin Holmes, Travone Sherrod Holmes, and  
Tamaira Samone Holmes to pursue an education so that  
they may strengthen their future endeavors and fulfill their dreams.

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to explore and review the literature on humor, particularly as it relates to interactions with children. Often adults, whether they are parents or teachers, devalue the use of humor in dealing with children.

Research supports that humor is a beneficial component of social interactions, especially with children. Studies have shown that children are receptive to humor beginning at very young ages, and that their sense of humor is developed and finely tuned as they mature. Findings show that by using humor in social situations, stress levels can be de-escalated, defensive reactions are reduced--which in turn helps curtail acting-out behaviors in the classroom, personal interactions become more prevalent, and positive cognitive learning takes place.

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Entitled: USING HUMOR WITH CHILDREN

has been approved as meeting the  
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AUGUST 2002

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION .....	1
Introduction .....	1
Statement of the Problem .....	2
Definitions .....	3
Organization of the Paper .....	6
CHAPTER II: DEVELOPMENTAL ASPECTS OF HUMOR .....	7
Theories: Psychological and Cognitive .....	7
Infancy /Preschool .....	10
K-12/Post-secondary .....	14
CHAPTER III: PARENTS USE OF HUMOR .....	19



CHAPTER IV: HUMOR IN THE CLASSROOM .....25

    Teachers’ Use of Humor .....26

    The Use of Humor with Learning Disabilities and  
    Behavior Disorders: Giftedness, Autism, Down Syndrome,  
    and Other Illnesses .....33

CHAPTER V: IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION .....45

    Promoting Humor As a Positive Attribute .....45

    Conclusions .....50

CHAPTER VI: REFERENCES .....52

APPENDIX .....63

    The Etiology & Treatment of Childhood .....64

# LITERATURE REVIEW: USING HUMOR WITH CHILDREN

BY CAROL J. ASWEGEN THORNHILL

AUGUST 2002

## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

*Humor is a serious thing and one of our greatest and earliest national resources that must be preserved at all costs ... James Thurber*

### Introduction

Humor theorists, early childhood specialists, and psychologists suggest that humor plays an important role in fostering children's development because humor requires the same type of cognitive insight as creative problem solving. Numerous studies have shown that humor and laughter help to de-stress many situations so that learning can take place. Therapeutic humor has been shown to be beneficial for all age groups, although it is particularly useful in dealing with children to promote cognitive development and social learning.

In general, humor increases the desirability of both parties to continue to interact. Laughing, associated with humor, has also been shown to benefit the body because it releases endorphins to produce a feeling of well-being, and often

improves our general over-all mood and frame of mind. Articles have been written discussing how humor and laughter can lower blood pressure, decrease stress, and increase immune system reactions, as well as help in pain relief as a result of increased dopamine hormone production.

This is particularly helpful during stressful situations when children feel threatened or inadequate in the classroom. Humor can aid in the learning process, increase positive social interactions, and develop later life skills for cognitive learning and creative problem-solving skills.

### Statement of the Problem

Many educators and parents do not appreciate the value of using humor with children, particularly in an educational setting. Recent studies (i.e., Bainum, Lounsbury & Pollio, Bariand, Bender, Hollingsworth, Rutter, etc.) have shown that children, parents, and educators can all benefit by using humor in interactions with children. Humor allows the atmosphere to become less threatening, and encourages the student to relax, de-stress, and become less defensive. This in turn aids the student to more fully comprehend and participate in his or her own learning experience. Because this friendlier atmosphere is conducive to students' learning experiences, the result is fewer behavioral problems and a reduction in the amount of teachers' instructional time devoted to discipline tactics.

The challenge is to use humor in a positive and productive manner, rather than allowing the destructive potential of humor to develop. By injecting humor into the classroom as a motivational tool for learning, cognitive development and social interactions are supported.

### Definitions

- Amuse:* To divert or occupy the attention of; to entertain or occupy in a light, playful, or pleasant manner (Webster, p. 40).
- Autism:* (1) Absorption in self-centered subjective mental activity (as daydreams, fantasies, delusions, and hallucinations) usually accompanied by marked withdrawal from reality; (2) a mental disorder originating in infancy that is characterized by self-absorption, inability to interact socially, repetitive behavior, and language dysfunction (Webster, p. 78).
- Behavior Disorder:* A repetitive and persistent pattern of behavior in which the basic rights of others or major age-appropriate societal norms or rules are violated (DSM-IV, p.85).
- Disability:* the state of being physically or mentally disabled; a legal disqualification or incapacity (Webster, p. 269).

- Divert:* to turn from one course or use to another; to give pleasure to esp., by distracting the attention from what burdens or distresses (Webster, p. 339).
- Exceptional:* (1) Forming an exception; rare; (2) better than average; superior; (3) deviating from the norm: as a) having above or below average intelligence b) physically handicapped (Webster, p. 404).
- Gifted:* (1) Having great natural ability; talented; (2) revealing a special gift (Webster, p. 491)
- Humor:* A social skill that can be learned and used to alleviate feelings of anxiety for oneself and others during social interactions; intellectual thought that arouses amusement and/or laughter to reduce stressful situations and assist in cognitive learning; a form of intellectual play. (Webster, p. 472).
- Joke:* An action, saying, event or circumstance which causes or is intended to cause amusement or laughter; something to be treated lightly, as not important, and with humor (Webster, p. 527). A device that uses primary processes to sneak forbidden impulses past the censor, thereby making a

laughing stock of instinctual taboos for a brief period

(Rutter, 1990, p. 250)

*Laugh:* (1) a) To show mirth, joy, or scorn with a smile and chuckle or explosive sound; b) to find amusement or pleasure in something [ex: at his own clumsiness] ... (Webster, p. 658)

*Learning Disabled:* Having difficulty in learning a basic scholastic skill because of a disorder (as autism, Down syndrom, dyslexia, attention deficit disorder, etc.) that interferes with the learning process (Webster, p. 623).

*Play:* A movement or activity, esp. quick or unconstrained; activity or exercise performed for amusement (Webster, p. 770). Play is what takes place in the "intermediate area" between internal fantasy and the external world (Winnicott, 1971).

*Therapeutic Humor:* Any intervention that promotes health and wellness by stimulating a playful discovery, expression or appreciation of the absurdity or incongruity of life's situations. This intervention may enhance health or be used as a complementary treatment of illness to facilitate healing or coping, whether physical, emotional, cognitive, social, or spiritual (<http://www.aath.org>).

## Organization of the Paper

Throughout the paper, a review of literature will be used to show how humor is beneficial when interacting with children, starting with infants and going through the lifespan. Humor can be used as a motivational tool to enhance respect for self and others, and to increase the potential for learning.

The first chapter of this paper begins with an Introduction, which includes the Statement of the Problem, Definitions, and Organization of the Paper. The second chapter covers the Developmental Aspects of Humor, including the two main psychological theories, and ranging from infancy through post-secondary education. The third chapter discusses Parental Use of Humor.

Following is a chapter on Humor In the Classroom highlighting Teachers' Use of Humor in dealing with children in general, and also Learning Disabilities and Behavior Disorders. The fifth chapter focuses on Promoting Humor as a Positive Attribute, followed by the final chapter on Implications and Conclusions.

## CHAPTER II: DEVELOPMENTAL ASPECTS OF CHILDREN'S HUMOR

*Humor is an important part of people's physical, social, and psychological functioning. Not only does humor change and develop as children grow and mature, but also that humor is essential for healthy cognitive, physical, social, and emotional growth (Brown, 1990a, 1991).*

Chapter II is comprised of three sections. First will be a discussion of the two main theories that are used to explain and demonstrate the use of humor. Following that will be a section on Infancy and Preschool children. The last section will review and discuss K-12 children and also some studies on Post-secondary education and the use of humor.

### Theories: Psychological and Cognitive

Two theoretical streams dominate literature on humor: the 'psychoanalytic theory' that deals with emotions, and the 'cognitive theory' that deals with reason. These two prominent theological paradigms are most often seen as complementary, rather than oppositional.



Psychoanalytic Theory. The psychoanalytic theory recognizes humor as a vehicle for expressing emotions -- particularly those emotions that are unacceptable. Rutter (1990, p. 250) found the relationship between humor and the unconscious has been "brilliantly exposed by Freud in 1905," and believed that jokes have many similarities to dreams. The main difference between the joke and the dream is that the joke has to obey some of the rules of waking life.

During a psychoanalytic session Mahon (1992) examined a child's attempt at humor. Mahon noted that there is a line between illusion and reality for children that seemed "precarious in this animistic world of beliefs and make-believe" (p. 322). During these sessions, Mahon told one of his child patients that jokes were wonderful, and asked "What would children do without them?" The child responded, "If the parents took all the jokes away and hid them in a closet, they could get them back by being good" (p. 322). He believes the child's ego is at work resolving the Oedipal conflict in a "relatively new language" and represents the conflict--partly in action, partly in language--as the child "tries to put a comic face on issues that are not necessarily funny" (ibid).

Mahon believes that just because a child's joke does not meet the criteria envisioned by people with more experience at making jokes, it should not diminish an appreciation of the child's impulse to put the dream in a more comical light, because the dream may have revealed too much of its dark intent to the child upon first waking up. His work also found that anxiety often derails a

joke, while developmental immaturity may actually compromise it. Mahon has also suggested that symbolic process of humor has multiple meanings, and becomes more complex as development proceeds (p. 321).

Kubie (1969) took the opposite stance when he analyzed the destructive potential of humor in psychotherapy. He noted that when an analyst laughs or jests in the psychoanalytic situation, it is important to be aware whether the person being analyzed feels he is being laughed at, or laughed with (p. 327). When someone feels threatened, withdrawal occurs. As a result, learning can become stymied or acting-out behaviors may be exhibited.

Cognitive Theory. The cognitive theory suggests that humor occurs when there is a restructuring of a well-known pattern of elements. An early researcher on humor, Chukovsky (1925) believed in both theories to explain a child's humor. His work suggested that when a child in latency is able to understand and tell rooster-roaster jokes, then the child has achieved sufficient mastery of humor to cover one-track Oedipal instincts with clever double meanings. The exploitation of double meanings in language and humor sends a signal to the adult community that the child has won a relative victory over their instincts. It also signals that the child is ready and able to transform desire into compromises that both repress and express the double meanings of defense.

Literature—the written word-- has been shown to help children in mastering double meanings, since humor requires the same type of cognitive

insight as does creative problem solving. The key messages delivered to children through illustrations and amusing tales in humorous storybooks is 1) life not being as complicated as it often seems, and 2) learning should be fun. In his study, Tannenbaum (1983) agreed, and proposed that the types of humor children enjoy are closely related to their developing personality structures and corresponding concerns.

### Humor in Infancy/Preschool

The developmental aspects of humor have been well documented by scientist and educator Leta Stetter Hollingsworth since 1923, and later followed by researcher Woffenstein in 1954. Their research found that children acquire an increasing capacity for humor as they mature. One reason may be the result of older children having been exposed more to humor as they attend schools and other programs outside the home where social interaction occurs. The age of the child and the amount of humor exhibited are considerations that support McGhee's (1979; 1983; 1989) developmental perspective on humor.

McGhee has proposed four stages in the development of children's humor, all of which entail the capacity to override reality. The first stage involves incongruous actions on objects, while the second stage involves incongruous labeling of objects or events. These stages commonly emerge between 18 months and 3 years. McGhee both stages are an important for young children's humor

development. Behavioral incongruity that involves breaking social rules was found to be appealing to young children who struggle with conformity. Several very early forms of humor include: tickling, familiar routine song or rhyme, silly or slapstick behavior, funny sounds, verbal incongruity, nonverbal or behavioral incongruity, and simple riddles or jokes.

The third stage involves conceptual incongruity, word play, and the early telling of jokes and riddles, and begins at about the age of 4. The final stage, typically reached by the age of 6 or 7, involves the ability to tell genuine jokes that demonstrate an appreciation of ambiguity and multiple meanings. The later two stages involve significantly more meta-cognitive and meta-linguistic capacities. McGhee believes the most common form of humor is the spontaneous witty remark delivered in social situations. Bariand (1989) expanded on McGhee's cognitive definition of humor, by adding that humor is not complete until it is placed in a social context.

Reddy (1991) agrees with the research by McGhee, and believes that even prior to 18 months, infants show clear evidence for understanding and appreciating humor which is based on the violation of expectations. These demonstrations for humor emerged at about 9 or 10 months, and are observed in the teasing behavior of infants. Thus, even the earliest types of humor may demonstrate at least an unquestionable understanding of mental states, particularly intentional displays of incongruence and expectation (p. 604).

Chaney (1993) studied the earliest jokes produced by three male children (age 13, 20, and 36 months) and how they contribute to a model of humor development. Her analysis showed these children appreciated incongruity as well as other kinds of surprises, such as similarity or the fulfillment of expectations. Additionally, she found children's humor may reflect greater cognitive capacities at younger ages than were formerly believed.

Longitudinal studies support her contention, and have shown that security during the first two years can predict many of the attributes in preschool and subsequent stages of development. Rutter (1990) proposed characteristics that included having a sense of humor for the resilient child. Rutter found that the humor of preschool children is connected to the total context of their language experience, and often involves distortions of--and challenges to--verbal and conversational conventions. Preschoolers' humor is more often exhibited in cooperative play and ongoing play relationships, than in destructive or separate activities.

Other researchers (i.e., Brodzinsky & Rightmeyer, Brown, Chaney, Daviees & Apter, Fern, Fonagy, etc.) have explored the development of humor, the positive potential of young children's humor, and resources for harnessing the energy of humor. Garvey (1977) noted that young children enjoy humor based on language incongruity. In the study of spontaneous play with language, it was noted that "as soon as a child has learned how something is supposed to be, then

turning it upside down or distorting it in some way becomes a source of fun" (p. 38). Humorous verse would be an example of how individuals playfully distort aspects of the physical, conceptual, or social world.

Humor can also include humorous prose, poetry, cartooning, standup comedy, impersonations, comedic performance, and mime. Humorous riddles and jokes therefore become more complex as people mature cognitively. Tamashiro (1979) agreed, noting that the majority of children in middle elementary grades enjoy clichéd, unoriginal jokes that include riddles, concrete puns, and knock-knock jokes.

Bainum, Lounsbury, and Pollio's (1984) naturalistic study of humor was conducted in a nursery school setting. They found that 95% of the humorous events occurred in the presence of other people. They concluded that laughing and smiling are social-affective expressions, suggesting that the development of humor involves the integration of cognitive, social, and affective factors. Klein (1992) agreed, and found that humor plays an important role in interpersonal relationships by alleviating stress and supporting children's emotional, social, and cognitive development.

In another study, Mayes, Klin, & Cohen (1994) did research on the understanding of false belief in 46 three- to five-year-olds. They used a false-belief situation involving humor, and characters playfully interacting with one another. Younger children had more difficulty with the humorous false-belief

task, whereas older children could more often identify the false-belief in the humorous situation. These findings were discussed in terms of the relations between social context as seen in the humorous situation, and the emerging understanding of mental states such as beliefs.

### K-12/Post-Secondary

Kindergarten, on the whole, tends to be a positive experience for children because they come to school eager to learn, with a lot of enthusiasm, and basically in equilibrium (Howe, p. 239). Almost everything is funny to kindergartners. Kindergartners especially like clowns and funny stories about animals and people. Bathroom humor or just saying words like “toilet” or “underwear” can cause young children to convulse with laughter. Their own humor is a reflection of their silliness and lack of cognitive sophistication. They are beginning to tell riddles, but the riddles may make very little sense and often adults are waiting for a punch line (Howe, p. 250).

Bariaud (1989) and Brodzinsky & Rightmeyer (1980) agree that humor emerges from skills and concepts that are known and recently mastered by children. Brown (1991) believes this is experience in situations where they feel physically, socially, and psychologically safe, and where ideas have been tested (p. 35).

At the opposite extreme of safety in humor emerges fear. Because of the kindergartner's inexperience in relationships with others, they are often overly sensitive and fearful. Nasty comments, name calling, toys being taken, and sticking out the tongue are all upsetting to kindergartners (Howe, p. 247).

Brown (1993) examined two age groups of children's pictorial humor and humor development. The study included 60 students: 30 four-year-olds and 30 six-year-olds in a single elementary school located in a large urban center in Canada. Results differed by gender but agreed strongly with those of Haig (1988) that suggest humor is indeed needed for physical, social, and psychological growth.

Sletta & Sobstad (1993) found that fourth graders' self-perception of humor still affected perceived social competence. In another study, Sletta & Sobstad (1993) found that eighth-graders' use of humor was predictive of self-perceptions of social competence and were directly related to students' perceptions of their own humor capacity. Humor--as assessed by peers—also generally predicted peer acceptance.

An exploratory investigation on humor by Shapiro, Baumeister, & Kessler (1991) on 34 teachers for 46 third-grade, 60 fifth-grade, and 68 eighth-grade children consisted of a literature review, theory development, and a report of the preliminary data. The study proposed that teasing consists of a communication, directed by an agent to a target, and synthesized elements of aggression, humor,



and ambiguity. For the target, making an attribution for the teaser's intention may become a complex task, and incorrect decoding may cause misunderstandings.

The teasers saw their motives as benign and friendly, whereas the targets sometimes saw the motives as hostile and painful.

For early adolescents, a large body of evidence indicates that undesirable major life events and minor daily events cause, contribute to, and exacerbate emotional and behavioral disturbances (Sobol, 1999). Sobol's work examined the relationship between humor, events, and functioning, as well as the impact of humor on young teens' emotional and behavioral response to events.

In a pilot study conducted by Brown (1990) on young adults and verbal humor, it was found that participants most often ignored the verbal aspects of cartoon riddles. The subjects instead explained humor that they found in the visual aspects. Brown then devised a four-category framework called the Visual Humor Categories to describe the source of humor in pictures as follows:

1. Category 1: Specific Visual Incongruity Unexplained. A specific part of the picture or action is identified as being funny, but no reason is given as to why it is funny.
2. Category 2: Specific Visual Incongruity Explained. A specific part of the picture or action is identified as being funny, but a reason is given to explain why the specific concept seems funny.

3. Category 3 -- General Visual Incongruity Unexplained. The picture, action, or situation as a whole (or at least the major characters) is identified as being funny. It is only hinted that this is unusual or 'not right,' but no reason is given as to why it is funny.
4. Category 4 -- General Visual Incongruity Explained. The picture, action, or situation as a whole (or at least the major characters) is identified as being funny. It is only hinted that this is unusual or 'not right,' but a reason is given to explain why the general concept seems funny.

The question remains as to whether or not Brown's Visual Humor Categories are useful as a measure of younger children's humor development (p. 36). It is also questionable whether the categories recognize gender differences since research has suggested that boys develop humor abilities earlier than girls. Groch's (1974) earlier research was supported by this analysis, especially if humor is nonverbal in nature (Brown, 1993, p. 39). Another explanation offered by McGhee (1979) was that boys may be better at recognizing sources of humor because they use it considerably more than girls do in their social interactions.

In summary, one can conclude that humor is a learned social skill that is begins even at a very young age through modeling and teaching of behaviors. Developing and maintaining a sense of humor is essential for maintaining a healthy self-esteem, and is beneficial to social interaction at every age-level.

Maintaining a sense of humor is beneficial for children and parents so that cognitive development and problem-solving skills can take place.

### CHAPTER III: PARENTS' USE OF HUMOR

*... Piagetian and Freudian ideas show that the psychological and the cognitive assist each other as the Oedipus complex succumbs to infantile amnesia at the beginning of latency. Humor may require similar developmental fruitions before it can fully establish itself. There is no question that humor can appear as early as age 2 (Chukovsky, 1925, p. 325).*

Humor is seen as a valuable social skill taught by both parents and teachers. Because children learn rapidly in the first few years of life, it is essential that parents make the home environment one of acceptance that is non-threatening to the child's self-esteem.

One of the simplest ways for parents to make children laugh is to exaggerate routine actions and expressions. With children who are flexible enough to accommodate inconsistent behavior in an adult, humor can be seen as introducing surprising or "inappropriate" behavior. Landy (1986, p. 175) found the distancing effects of humor helped the children to grasp the concept of pretending. Older siblings and parents pretending to cry is another form of amusing many younger children. Because pretending sometimes produces anxiety,

anger, or tears in the beginning, one must be careful about its use to implement later acceptance.

The capacity to suspend the demands of immediate physical reality and contemplate alternative perceptions--while retaining the distinction between what is fantasized and what is real--offers a tremendous advantage to the individual in dealing with life's adversities. The willingness and capacity to plan and project alternative realities in play, is "rooted in reflective-self function" (Rutter, 1990, p. 250).

Zimmerman & Protinsky (1990) examined how strategic parenting theory and techniques were taught to clinical families in therapy. The approach they used empowered parents to think systematically, develop creative parenting strategies, and encouraged the use of humor in their relationships with their children.

Kahen, Katz, & Gottman (1994) also examined the ways that parenting behavior during parent-child interaction related to children's ability to successfully interact with peers in 56 families with children aged four- to six-years of age. The father's emotional volatility was related to children's tendency to play at a low level of engagement with their best friends. Conversely, the mother's emotional communication was related to the degree to which children displayed positive affect with peers. Parental intrusiveness, low engagement, and use of derisive humor were also related to children's negativity during peer interaction.

In other research by Honig (1996), it was discovered that using humor was an effective means to help shape and model children's behavior. Honig's research found that through the use of calming tones and caresses, rewarding desired behaviors contingently, avoiding over-praise, labeling desirable behaviors, modeling behaviors, varying tempos of activities, refocusing and redirecting inappropriate actions, respecting individual temperaments, building self-esteem, and using humor parents could more effectively offer guidance to their children.

Research by Borchardt (1996) contends that "having a sense of humor in proportion to what ails you as a parent" is an effective means of keeping family relationships happy and healthy. Borchardt disputes many well-established beliefs about the importance of family life. He maintains that as the sacredness of family relationships is decreased, pressures are relieved, and members can then more effectively handle difficult situations. *The importance of self-reflection for attachment is greatest when the hardship suffered by the parent places him or her at risk of recreating negative experiences from their own childhood with the child.*

He suggested the extent of this risk will correspond to the likelihood that the

- caregiver inaccurately attributes his or her own mental states to the child (p. 249).

Research studies by McGhee (1979), Honig (1988), and Martin (1989) found similar attributes for the use of humor in relationships with children. Klein (1992) described the benefits of using humor, such that humor:

1. helps children cope with stress; by its very nature, humor playfully distorts or exaggerates reality.
2. provides a release of tension' when conflict situations are presented in a humorous story children are relieved to see storybook characters resolve difficult problems in comic but constructive ways.
3. is a coping mechanism that helps alleviate anxiety.
4. facilitates creative thinking because it is based on incongruity; children must understand how events differ from reality.
5. is a cognitive process that allows children to verify recently acquired knowledge; when children understand how social or language rules are violated in humor, they experience a sense of competence and mastery (p. 213).

Klein (1992) states that humor "enhances learning because it arouses, motivates, and stimulates children's thinking" (p. 215). A prime example of techniques to stimulate learning a young child's learning is through storybooks. Humorous picture books were found to be beneficial because they "employ exaggeration and physical incongruity to help young children develop basic concepts" (ibid).

From a very early age, humorous storybooks--through illustrations and amusing tales--give children the message that life is not as complicated as it

seems and that learning is fun. Klein critiqued children's books and found that action and body movements are the basis for humor in books. Typically, the books describe exciting and pleasurable activities for toddlers, who are at the development stage when they must learn impulse control and self-regulation.

Klein found that storybook humor supported children's development and offered 20 suggestions for nurturing humor in young children. He stated humor provides:

a 'window' through which very young children can view the world and begin to understand complexities.... And like a window, storybook humor furnishes 'light'--it enlightens children by shielding them from the stress of growing up (ibid, p. 216).

In a more recent study, Zarnowski (2000) suggested that humor is needed in literature, and believes that humor can help to ventilate feelings of oppressive conditions. She suggests that humor can also be used as a tool to provide a different view of reality, and to provide hope, pleasure, and fun in reading. Additionally, she believes poetry books provide wonderful opportunities for small children to expand their knowledge about language in the context of humor.

Similarly, the study by Lancy & Bergin (1992) showed that parent-child pairs who view the child's reading as fun, have children who are more fluent and more positive about readings. These parents keep the story flowing by using



semantic-oriented rather than decoding-oriented correction tactics, encourage questions about the story, and express humor while reading.

In conclusion, research contends that parents' attitudes and social behaviors are the major influence for young children in developing a sense of humor. Storybooks are one way to use humor to help young children deal with the inconsistencies of life during the formative years. As the child matures and goes to school, the teachers' use of humor can provide a stress-free environment for cognitive development to take place.

#### IV. HUMOR IN THE CLASSROOM

*... aversive experiences of an extreme kind may lead to a defensive inhibition of particular mental functions, if the use of such functions is consistently linked with the experience of anxiety or unpleasure. Reflective self-function is vulnerable to such inhibition. This inhibition goes beyond insecure attachment manifested in defensive behaviors. It leaves the individual vulnerable to all encounters where they may be required to reflect in depth upon the mental states of their objects or their own mental functions. In our view narcissistic or borderline states may be understood as severe dysfunctions of reflective-self function (Rutter, 1990, p. 235).*

Humor is a social skill that develops with growth. Once the child is old enough to attend school, teachers then take the forefront in helping children to become resilient and to also develop a sense of humor. Teachers that maintain a sense of humor themselves, and allow for constructive humor in social situations, can be instrumental in encouraging and fostering cognitive development in children. Successful teachers befriend students and care about them as individuals with something to offer. Education--as student-centered--provides for

individualized approaches that are systematic to inquiry. These approaches are vital to understanding and building improved educational programs and systems.

### Teachers' Use of Humor

Leta Hollingworth (1923) was a pioneer in using humor with children in a school setting. She was an educator, scientist, and respected scholar who stressed looking at the whole child to assess special strengths. Leta strongly believed that teachers should give up the notion that children can--or should--be made to fit the schools, and instead should turn to the rational endeavor of fitting the school to the needs and capacities of children. She also believed that schools should develop individual education plans for children based on factual evidence (Hollingworth, p. 75).

Griffin (1990) has used Hollingworth's work and analogy of a Navajo Hogan to do research on teaching and learning. The hogan is a six-sided house constructed with only one door that faces east. Hogans are always built with a view, are open rooms with no built-in obstructions, and have a central focal point. In a traditional Navajo home this focus is the hearth. The six walls of the hogan represent concern for the individual, recognition of special abilities, objective observation, wit/humor, friendship, and vision. Griffin expanded and defined the six key factors of learning as: space, time, multiplicity of stimuli, level, language, and relationship (p. 195).

Fern (1991) has also agreed with Hollingsworth and Griffin, stating that humor "preserves, prolongs, or adds meaning to life" (p. 30). Fern sees children that have a special gift or talent for creating or performing humor as having a potential for self-fulfillment. She also believes this gift provides the rest of us with endless hours of joy and insight.

Research by Chaney (1993) indicates that children's humor may reflect greater cognitive capacities at younger ages than formerly believed. In this regard, children who are seen as "funny" early in life, are often known as the "class clowns" during later years. At times these behavioral displays are helpful, but teachers--as well as parents and counselors--need to be aware that the class clown may really be begging for help in dealing with an inadequacy or disability. Humor, as such, is often a defense mechanism that children use to defend against painful issues, and can be used to compensate for feelings they do not understand. Rao (2002) believes that children do not behave randomly, and class clowns will often use humor to compensate for learning difficulties.

Some studies have also shown that humor has a positive effect on information acquisition, and that humor facilitates student learning and teacher instruction (Davies & Apter, 1980; Hauck & Thomas, 1972; Ziv, 1982; Zillmann, et al. 1989). Teachers are more apt to identify a greater number of children who produce original humor in any form than those who reproduce it.

A study by Sletta & Sobstad (1993) examined relations between children's humor, behavioral characteristics, acceptance by peers in kindergarten, and self-perceptions. Analysis indicated that kindergarten children's humor--as assessed by their teachers--was not consistently related to peer acceptance or rejection, or to self-perceived humor and behavior. Barbieri (2000) found that a fourth-grader that was never viewed as a 'smart' kid demonstrated a high degree of thinking and a "prowess defied by testing" when exhibiting creative excuses, impish pranks, and a quick wit in dealing with a principal in attention-getting behaviors.

A study by Snetsinger (1993) found the group receiving the visual strategy that incorporated a humorous theme and cartoons with humorous comments relevant to the content helped motivate 100 college students to focus on and retain computer-based instructional material. Research by Sellnow (1993) examined the positive effects that the use of humor has on relationships between parents and teachers. Humor, like self-disclosure, fostered a warm communication climate and increased teacher approachability. In addition, it was shown that 97% of the students liked teachers' attempts at humor.

A study by Bender (1994) of award winning teachers found that a sense of humor was essential to their success. Similarly, Rainsberger (1994) found that humor was an important classroom management technique to reduce stress and tension of both teachers and students. Crump (1996) found that humor was the

most effective and important tool a teacher could have in research with college students.

Hashem (1994) found that teachers can use play and humor to establish a climate conducive to learning and mastering effective skills in interpersonal communication classes. Having fun meant students as well as teachers learn a great deal about interpersonal communication. Teachers and students are enhancing their interpersonal relationships, relieving tension, eliminating boredom, improving class attendance, improving active participation, heightening self-awareness of the importance of others, increasing self-confidence, and enjoying what they are doing. Hashem believes teachers should encourage the a good sense of humor while playing, as well as carefully considering the major factors of listening, affection, acceptance, respect, and timing during instruction. By doing this, teachers and students would then realize it is safe to make mistakes and that they can learn from them.

Research by Carter (1994) found that teachers' individual strategies to successful interaction in school with colleagues and students included, among other things: desensitization, dreams, humor, imagining, leaving stress behind, relaxation, responding to student concerns, self-praise, and social support. Harder (1999), a principal in an Oregon elementary school, believes that of the 15 life skills necessary to produce a safe learning environment, humor is an essential component.

A study by Boerman-Cornell (1999), an English teacher, compares the effects of different types of humor in the classroom in order to help students find humor in what they read and write. His study drew on the effects of humor in the following five ways--humor as it:

1. is drawn from literature.
2. is at the expense of literature.
3. puts someone down.
4. builds up or shapes identity.
5. is used as a classroom-management tool.

In a three-year study of college students by Berk (1996), humor was used as a teaching tool to reduce anxiety and improve the ability to learn so as to assist students to perform their best on problem-solving exercises and exams. Research by Frymier and Wanzer (1998) indicated that the interaction between teacher humor orientation and student humor orientation resulted in a high correlation between humor orientation of the teacher and increased student learning.

Similarly, Forlin (1998) and Godbey (1997) found that humor was among effective preventative measures that teachers could use to alleviate the stress that some students experience in mathematics problem solving. Specifically, instructors can improve students' confidence and performance by:

1. Being mindful of their students' feelings;
2. Introducing humor into the classroom setting;

3. Sustaining enthusiasm for the subject matter; and
4. Motivating students to change pessimistic learning styles to optimistic ones.

Additionally, Margolin (1997) suggested 10 linkages between educational philosophy and classroom activities. One of these linkages indicated that humor is an important element in the classroom, and that children need to be allowed to be silly in activities involving poetry, singing, dancing, and art. Margolin also noted that teachers usually have high ideals for the students in their classroom, and know how their behavior affects the student's enjoyment and learning. He suggested teachers analyze self-behavior because it is worth the effort to bring about changes that are beneficial to children's learning.

Myrah & Erlauer (1999) found that brain-based effective teaching strategies included the use of humor, as well as movement, music, metaphors, personal stories, color, and brainstorming. Similarly, Tamblyn (2000) suggests that humor for learners "builds rapport, encourages creativity, makes learners feel safe, reduces fatigue, and activates long-term memory." He listed a sense of humor as third in a list of the seven qualities needed for successful teaching.

Zuk & Dalton (1999) analyzed over 5,000 works of art by North American Native artists to show how humor was used as an effective means to educate marginalized groups about cultural perspectives. They believe that art is vital to



helping students enjoy and understand cultures that are different from their own, and an important element of multicultural education.

Prouty (2000) believes a state of 'relaxed alertness' is induced by fun and humor that facilitates the integration of mind and body for learning. His perspective of the whole, aided by humor, is the key to achieving goals and fostering creative problem-solving that essential leadership skills in education can develop.

A study by Shanoski & Hranitz (1991) develops a portrait of 1991 Teachers of the Year from across the country. The questionnaire included:

1. important teacher characteristics,
2. educational background/experience
3. important teacher tasks,
4. evaluation of their teacher education programs, and
5. reactions to current educational issues and trends.

Data indicate that Teachers of the Year are high achievers who have pursued their education beyond the bachelor's degree. Important teacher characteristics included love of children, subject matter knowledge, excellent communication skills, flexibility, and sense of humor.

Burgess (2000) believes that humor in teaching can be used to bring more joy into both the learning and teaching process. Similarly, Blake & Garner (2000) identified humor as the most important personal attribute, both in terms of

frequency and its position as the top-priority characteristic for successful teaching with behavioral problems.

### The Use of Humor with Learning Disabilities and Behavior Disorders:

#### Giftedness, Autism, Down Syndrome, and Other Illnesses

A healthy dose of humor can go a long way toward fostering understanding and empathy when dealing with disabilities. Popcorn & Peanuts Learning Differences Resources (www) have the following statements on their webpage regarding autism, bipolar/mental disabilities. These diagnosis are:

not exactly 'learning disabilities,' they include traits that are often associated with them. Disabilities may be considered a spectrum rather than defined diagnosis, and children who are primarily LD may still exhibit behaviors from other clusters of traits.... Traits are learned, adaptive mechanisms for coping with the disabilities.... Learning disabilities are often just another way of looking and thinking!

Jordan (1992) studied early education program staff that wish to nurture special qualities of difficult children. Program staff could identify specific qualities, allow for children's expression of feelings, and build children's self-esteem. Staff restructured their daily schedule to help children deal with difficult times, and also practiced a philosophy that respected the uniqueness of each child.

A study of 652 boys aged 13 to 17 with severe aggression and emotional disturbance by Vance, Fernandez, & Biber (1998) showed that humor was associated with positive education progress and good problem-solving skills. Peterson & Deal (1998) found that schools with strong, positive cultures had principals, teachers, and parents who use humor to craft school culture, and act as “models, potters, poets, actors, and healers.”

Research done by practitioners in Illinois sought to determine the particular teacher interventions that six aggressive adolescents (14-17) perceived as most effective in helping them to develop their academic and social skills in mainstreamed classrooms. The practitioners used student interviews and classroom observations. The intervention methods perceived as helpful included: flexible academic and behavioral expectations, personal interaction between students and teachers, and humor.

Giftedness. Hollingworth (1939) was a pioneer in the field of giftedness, and recognized that every learning disabled child was different from all other learning disabled children, as well as from "the norm." Remembering this aspect of Leta's work is important when using it as a model for today's teachers of learning disabled and gifted children. Leta observed and described persons of special abilities--and disabilities--including highly gifted, learning disabled, gifted, mentally retarded, adolescents, and females. She consistently emphasized the importance of discovering abilities, and believed the attribute of objective

observation has an implicit message for teachers of learning disabled gifted students--especially highly gifted students--who have learned to disguise or compensate for their disability.

Wit and humor were central to Hollingworth's personality, and she used these attributes liberally in her counseling with gifted children. For teachers of the learning disabled gifted, humor means teaching with a "light touch," personalizing the learning process, and striking a deliberate balance between work and play. It also means making light of personal disabilities or learning inefficiencies, and helping students to understand and be open about their inabilities. Hollingworth was said to have had the special vision to understand that studies and special curricula for gifted children, programs for disabled and handicapped persons, individualized counseling, development and use of standardized tests, concerns for the status and roles in society of girls and women, child-centered curricula, and leadership training were all concepts and approaches that are in their infancy, but were vitally important in teaching. (Griffin, 1990, p. 194).

Research by Tamashiro (1979) indicated gifted children appeared somewhat disenchanted with typical riddles and jokes enjoyed by most of their peers. These children developed an appreciation for humor and were able to create more abstract and sophisticated forms of humor earlier than age- or grade-peers.

Tannenbaum's (1983) concept of the gifted child as a "producer and innovator of new ideas" is in line with identifying youngsters who demonstrate a talent for producing humor. Janus (1975) found most professional comedians and comedy writers were in the superior to very superior range of intelligence scores.

Kaiser, Freeman, and Wingate (1985) found that often disabled students employ dress to take advantage of their social uniqueness through such techniques as wearing bright or prominent clothing or by displaying humor as a tool to diffuse difficult situations. While humor that is directed at, or at the expense of the handicapped is entwined in American culture, Anderson (1988) believes that teaching tolerance helps to eradicate prejudice by examining what we fear and also what we laugh at. Different from ancient and Medieval festivals that associated disabilities with humor and eroticism, today we can help develop a positive view of disabilities by encouraging a positive sense of identify (Hahn, 1988). De-Koning, Conradie, and Nel (1990) found that in general, there was some evidence to suggest that watching humorous television shows may actually lower the excitatory potential in children, and thus lead to a reduction of aggressive behavior.

Fern (1990) found no single cause as to why a child chooses to use humor, or an explanation of why the child does so relatively early in life. Humor can be viewed as a way to gain approval, attention, and recognition. It supports the

psychoanalytic position that some youngsters learn to use humor as a coping mechanism for dealing with emotional stress and conflict, and also use humor primarily as a means of expressing themselves.

Fern (1991) identified gifted child humorists to explore various cognitive, motivational, and socio-affective factors that influence their ability to produce humor. The study involved 1,204 children and teachers from three suburban districts in New York, grades 3-6. Of these, 73 students met the criteria for funniness, originality, exemplary performance, and above-grade-level expectations to each child's product or performance, and received at least two nominations from their peers or teachers. Thirteen were in the gifted category, and only 12 female students received peer nominations.

As a follow-up study by Fern (1991) of the 13 gifted children, funniness, originality, exemplary performance, and above-level expectations were used to assess humor levels. More than half of the identified gifted child humorists scored above-average to superior in their group intelligence tests. The antecedent behaviors associated with humor creation by gifted humorists in the study included: verbal aggressiveness, dominance over peers, continued attention-seeking behavior after preschool years, clownish behavior, imaginative thinking and play, the existence of imaginary playmates, and precocious language development (Fern, p. 31).

In the same study personal variables of the identified students included: all had a high incidence of family trauma, 9 had asthmatic and allergic disorders, 3 were retained one year in school, 4 were designated as learning disabled in reading, language arts, or handwriting, and 2 received remedial help in reading or math during the past two years. A strong association was found between humor and curiosity, sociability, musical ability, and leadership over peers. All identified students demonstrated a great concern and compassion for others. Children who scored in the upper ranges of tests were primarily original producers of humor; children who scored in the average ranges of these tests were identified principally for exceptional performance capabilities or cartooning skills (p. 32)

The study showed that these students defied myths about funny kids: they were not overweight, short, hostile, physically aggressive, or raised under conditions of severe deprivation or poverty, did not represent any religion, nor occupy any family position. Not all were behavior problems; most were socially popular, happy, fairly well-adjusted children, but several had to cope with a good deal of stress resulting from personal family traumas.

Crowley (1991) indicated intervention methods perceived as helpful for disabilities that included: flexible academic expectations, flexible behavioral expectations, personal interaction between students and teachers, and humor. Marini (1992) and Short (1993) believed the basic guidelines for assisting disabled persons should include adding humor to their repertoire of interpersonal

skills. Similarly, Braithwaite & Labrecque (1994) found seven communication strategies that persons with visible physical disabilities can use to manage the discomfort of able-bodied persons with whom they interact included: initiation, modeling behavior, establishing normalcy, humor, confrontation, intentional embarrassment, and avoidance.

Stern & DuBois (1994) did research on advocates and advisors in the fields of Science, Mathematics, and Engineering in working with college students with disabilities. They emphasized the importance of maintaining a sense of humor and achieving real competence in one's chosen field. Bees (1999) found that while children without disabilities could comprehend cartoons better, there was no major difference in the production of humor by the learning disabled or developmentally handicapped children. Similarly, Bees found that adolescents who are both gifted and learning disabled have unique needs, and that humor, trust, and encouragement result in successful educational programs. A book written by Galbraith (2000) uses cartoons and commentary to provide parents with information on the characteristics, challenges, and joys of parenting a gifted child.

Autism and Down Syndrome. Research by O'Doherty (1989) found "many Down Syndrome children had the desire and ability to play spontaneously and dramatically, yet somehow lacked the skills to do so." It was suggested this could be due to affective, rather than cognitive deficits. Rather than experiencing themselves as rulers of the universe in their early lives, children with Down



Syndrome may see themselves as the passive recipients of process of dubious value (p. 171). He cited organic and environmental factors that conspire in many families to disrupt normal interaction, greatly complicating the children's imaginative development (p. 172). O'Doherty felt that by providing these children with positive sensory experiences they might be able to rewrite the sensory script of their early development (p. 173).

In a naturalistic context, the type of humor exhibited is usually dependent on context and on the child's mood. St. James & Tager-Flusberg (1994) believed one critical feature of humor involves the recognition and intentional manipulation of another person's expectations, and may provide clues to early deficits in the understanding of other minds. They found significant correlations between age and amount of humor in autistic children (p. 610). Although their study suggests that adults with autism are capable of humor, it does not provide any clues about how humor may be tied to aspects of social-cognitive functioning in this population. Additionally, they believe that humor may offer a unique perspective on the nature of the deficits in the cognitive, social, and affective domains of autism.

St. James & Tager-Flusberg (ibid) conducted a longitudinal study using humor with Autism and Down Syndrome children over a one-year time span. They observed six children--four boys and two girls with Down syndrome who were selected to match individually the autistic children on age- and language-

level. The observations were bi-monthly in the children's home during spontaneous interaction with their mothers. Humor was initiated by the child and indicated by the presence of laughter (p. 605).

Humor episodes were analyzed on three dimensions: cognitive developmental, social, and intentionality. The majority of humor (80%) produced by children in both groups was at a nonverbal level. They found that the autistic children produced significantly less humor overall (165/712 episodes). Additionally, there was also less humor involving nonverbal incongruity, but only to a limited extent in a naturalistic setting (p. 603). The only examples of jokes (riddles) were by two of the Down syndrome children, who also produced significantly more episodes of humor involving nonverbal incongruity (p. 611). Of the 125 episodes in the verbal incongruity category, 100 were from the Down syndrome children, while only 25 were from the autistic children. The 12 riddles were produced by two of the Down syndrome children.

No significant differences were found between the groups on any of the social dimension categories (p. 612). Because autism involves primary deficits in the social-cognitive and affective domains, it was not surprising that the children with autism produced fewer episodes of humor than the children with Down syndrome. The differences between the groups were even wider among the older children in each group, and also at the higher levels on the cognitive developmental and intentionality dimensions (pp. 613-614).

For the Down syndrome children, the vast majority of humor episodes were socially shared experiences. The children found great enjoyment in social shared affective experiences of humor. Autistic children may not have the capacity to understand another person's expectations and can intentionally violate these expectations in the context of humor (p. 614). Very little of this type of humor was generated by the children with autism, which may suggest that they have a deficit in this regard, and suggests that the overall reduction of humor in this population may indeed be related to their social-cognitive deficits in understanding mental states. This is the basis for most humor beyond the simplest levels, and underlies the source of their difficulty with humor, rather than a lack of desire to engage in shared experiences of pleasure and laughter.

In addition, there may be a difference between the autistic children's understanding of verbal and nonverbal incongruity that is related to their relative strengths in the domain of language. Since all the children in this study were verbal, their relative weaknesses were in symbolic play and nonverbal communication. Deficits in the domain of nonverbal communication may underlie the difficulties of the autistic children in producing examples of humor involving nonverbal incongruity, which require the child to use a symbolic gesture in a playful manner that violates the expected use of an object (p. 615). The Down syndrome children told "knock-knock" jokes which, according to McGhee (1979) are one of the first types of riddles that children tell. The

understanding and production of humor in this population may be related to other aspects of their social-cognitive functioning beyond the preschool level (p. 616).

Other Disabilities. The research by Blount, et al. (1989) centered on verbal interactions that occurred during bone marrow aspirations and lumbar puncture procedures repeated at least every 2 weeks on 14 boys and 9 girls between the age of 5-13 years. The child's ability to cope typically was preceded and followed by adult commands to the child to engage in coping procedures, by nonprocedural talk to the child, and by humor directed to the child. It was found younger children exhibited more diffuse verbal and physical expressions of distress over a longer duration. It was also found that girls exhibited higher levels of anxiety than boys, and also that children do not habituate with repeated procedures. The simple presence or absence of a parent does not identify specific parental behaviors that might be responsible for facilitating or hindering the child's ability to cope, but maternal presence was a factor in coping procedures.

It was also shown that only one-third of the children used the coping skills they had been taught immediately prior to a stressful medical procedure (p. 586). These coping strategies were thought to give the child control over some aspect of the procedure resulted in increased tolerance for longer treatment periods (p. 587). Nonprocedural talk appears to be the appropriate adult cue for the child coping behaviors of nonprocedural talk and humor as a form of distraction (p. 588). The

child's coping behaviors: included nonprocedural talk by the child and humor by the child, audible deep breathing, and making coping statements (p. 589).

In conclusion, teachers are key players in developing humor within their students. Teacher, as well as students, can benefit from the use of humor in the classroom. In particular, learning disabilities and behavior problems are lessened, and students feel freer to participate in their own learning because the environment becomes *less-threatening*, causing the *fear of failure* to be reduced.

## CHAPTER V: IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

*To be able to get through life, we must be able to laugh at ourselves 'cause everyone else is laughing at us!' (Wade, 2000).*

Humor usually serves as a positive function for children, parents, and teachers. Humor can be seen as a double-edged sword—both constructive and destructive. According to Revelations in the Holy Bible, laughter is one of our best defenses against fear. Knowing the right place and time is often very crucial and can take the edge off touchy situations, and also helps to put people more at ease. Former Texas Governor Ann Richards stated in an interview with Larry King “when humor doesn’t hit the mark, it is rejected; otherwise it is ingested and taken in.”

### Promoting Humor As A Positive Attribute

Humor serves as a tension-reducer to relieve stress and burnout, creates good feelings in self and others, facilitates communication, and promotes flexible thinking, according to Morreall (1963). Humor is seen as a powerful tool in the creation of a positive classroom communication climate. It reduces the fears and anxieties of students, and also increases

student interaction and participation. Humor makes the learning environment more enjoyable (Dickmeyer, 1993).

The use of humor varies with students' sophistication, intelligence, and maturity levels, and is no longer seen as a peripheral issue in education (Rareshide, 1993). Decidedly, most theorists mentioned in this paper agree that children must perfect their own sense of humor. Wade (2000) suggests when using humor, one should take what is called the AT&T test: ask yourself if it is Appropriate, Timely, and Tasteful.

Rutter (1990) believes humor can be used to develop resilience. He stated that resilience could not be thought of as an attribute born into children, or even acquired during development. It is the indication of a process that characterizes a complex social system at a moment in time. There may be experiences that 'inoculate' the child against stress, perhaps by modifying the process of appraisal. Rutter also found that many maltreated children become effective parents, despite the considerable risk for intergenerational transmission of abuse (p. 233). He also stated that "History is not destiny" (p. 234), indicating that experiences in happy family or social interactions may limit a deprived child's exposure to risky aspects of their environments.

A study by Fonagy, et al. (1994) gives practical interventions to build upon the concept of resilience. The study defined immediate

circumstances to include: (1) a good/warm relationship with at least one primary caregiver, and (2) a better educational experience. Fonagy found that stressful life events have repeatedly demonstrated strong associations between life event scores and risk of maladjustment, and defined one the attributes of resilient children as possessing an easy temperament (p. 231).

Additionally, resilient children's psychological function was defined as:

1. high IQ;
2. superior coping styles;
3. task related self-efficacy;
4. autonomy or internal locus of control;
5. higher sense of self-worth;
6. interpersonal awareness and empathy;
7. willingness and capacity to plan;
8. sense of humour (p. 232).

Producing resilient children is part of a shift in the focus of primary prevention. Humor in the face of hazing indicates that the initiate wants very much to be in the group. Martini (1994) stated that “when a child is able to put up with social teasing and unwarranted attacks,” the child has grown up and joined the group.

Research by Vanistendael (1995) focused on resiliency in individuals facing difficult life conditions. His research suggests five



interlinking bases for resiliency, one of which was humor. Similarly, Goldman (1995) found that there are eight characteristics or attitudes of an emotionally healthy adult, one of which was having a sense of humor. Desetta & Wolin (2000) found that humor was among the seven types of resilience that assisted teens in overcoming major life obstacles.

Crawford (1994) found that during debates both rudeness and humor are important considerations in the outcome results. Although using humor increased audience attention, personalized the situation, and increased audience perception of debater credibility, one of the drawbacks was perceived inadequacy by judges. The exception to this was when the debater used 'ad homonym' attack humor, which was considered rude behavior. Another study by Crawford (1994) showed humor to be a trainable skill that can be used to create a positive learning and workplace environment, and offered 14 specific guidelines for effective use of humor.

Positive and creative directions can also involve channeling children's energies by providing them with a choice of humorous activities to pursue, and also opportunities where they can share their endeavors with the class. Metaphorical thinking involving the use of analogies, transformation, paradoxes, comedy script writing, clowning and comedic performing, cartooning, and other activities that do not receive sufficient

attention in the regular classroom might be emphasized during these presentations.

Research suggests there is a close association between humor and aggressive or dominating forms of behavior, indicating our society may consider initiation of humor to be more appropriate for males than for females. Research by Fern (1991) showed that males were more often joke-tellers, and females were typically in the position of reacting to the humor (Fern, p. 33).

Fern (1990) developed a curriculum on humor called Project Funny Bone. She believes that "Humor is something which causes a tickling of the brain -- laughter was invented to scratch it" (p. 34). Fern believes that if teachers provide acceptable outlets for children to gain recognition and a sense of importance through humor, many potential behavior problems may dissipate (p. 33).

Bell (1991) did research on Gestalt imagery with children. He felt that Gestalt imagery, or the ability to create imaged wholes, is a critical factor in oral and written language comprehension. Weak Gestalt imagery contributes weak oral language expression, weak reading comprehension, weak oral language comprehension, weak language expression, difficulty following directions, and a weak sense of humor. This in turn leads to frustration and behavior disorders that are exhibited in classrooms.

Research by Swanson (1996) on the use of humor in public service announcements showed that employing humor as a presentational device also to helped stimulate the behavioral changes needed to shape public opinion and influence behavior. Swanson felt that insufficient attention has been given to the display of humor in public broadcasting, and has been used more often in politics, the workplace, and educational settings when classroom teachers wish to reduce tension and facilitate learning. In all these situations, humor offers room to question the boundaries of domesticity, behavior, and learning, and is an effective tension reducer.

Prouty (2000) found that creativity is increasingly valued in both education and business. His research showed that humor, fun, and play “take the brain from cognitive, rule-bound states to a more fluid state where the whole body can work on a problem while the ‘thinking mind’ is relaxed.”

### Conclusions

Humor at any age is a socially desirable trait. Parents and teachers who possess a sense of humor are more likely to be attractive to others. The same can be said for children. Most parents appeared to have a fine sense of humor also, and to enjoy their children's humor (although at times they wished it could be turned off).

Some of the studies in this paper suggest students manifested attention-getting mechanisms that got them into trouble, even though they were bright, articulate, and were often restless in class, and were reprimanded frequently for talking or socializing too much.

Throughout this paper, the intent was to show how humor is a social skill that is taught and learned throughout the lifespan. Humor can be used as a motivational tool to enhance learning and create a non-threatening atmosphere so that students—young and old alike—can increase their potential for learning.

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## APPENDIX



## **Humor: Themes: The Etiology & Treatment of Childhood**

### **The Etiology & Treatment of Childhood**

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Childhood is a syndrome which has only recently begun to receive serious attention from clinicians. The syndrome itself, however, is not at all recent. As early as the 8th century, the Persian historian Kidnom made references to "short, noisy creatures," who may well have been what we now call "children." The treatment of children, however, was unknown until this century, when so-called "child psychologists" and "child psychiatrists" became common. Despite this history of clinical neglect, it has been estimated that well over half of all Americans alive today have experienced childhood directly (Suess, 1983). In fact, the actual numbers are probably much higher, since these data are based on self-reports which may be subject to social desirability biases and retrospective distortion.

The growing acceptance of childhood as a distinct phenomenon is reflected in the proposed inclusion of the syndrome in the upcoming Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th edition, or DSM-IV, of the American Psychiatric Association (1990). Clinicians are still in disagreement about the significant clinical features of childhood, but the proposed DSM-IV will almost certainly include the following core features:

Congenital onset  
Dwarfism  
Emotional lability and immaturity  
Knowledge deficits  
Legume anorexia

### **Clinical Features of Childhood**

Although the focus of this paper is on the efficacy of conventional treatment of childhood, the five clinical markers mentioned above merit further discussion for those unfamiliar with this patient population.

#### **Congenital Onset**

In one of the few existing literature reviews on childhood, Temple-Black (1982) has noted that childhood is almost always present at birth, although it may go undetected for years or even remain subclinical indefinitely. This observation has led some investigators to speculate on a biological contribution to childhood. As one psychologist has put it, "we may soon be in a position to distinguish organic childhood from functional childhood" (Rogers, 1979).

#### **Dwarfism**

This is certainly the most familiar marker of childhood. It is widely known that children are physically short relative to the population at large. Indeed, common clinical wisdom suggests that the treatment of the so-called "small child" (or "tot") is particularly difficult. These children are known to exhibit infantile behavior and display a startling lack of insight (Tom and Jerry, 1967).

#### **Emotional Lability and Immaturity**

This aspect of childhood is often the only basis for a clinician's diagnosis. As a result, many otherwise normal adults are misdiagnosed as children and must suffer the unnecessary social stigma of being labeled a "child" by professionals and friends alike.

#### **Knowledge Deficits**

While many children have IQ's with or even above the norm, almost all will manifest knowledge deficits. Anyone who has known a real child has experienced the frustration of trying to discuss any topic that requires some general knowledge. Children seem to have little knowledge about the world



they live in. Politics, art, and science -- children are largely ignorant of these. Perhaps it is because of this ignorance, but the sad fact is that most children have few friends who are not, themselves, children.

### **Legume Anorexia**

This last identifying feature is perhaps the most unexpected. Folk wisdom is supported by empirical observation -- children will rarely eat their vegetables (see Popeye, 1957, for review).

### **Causes of Childhood**

Now that we know what it is, what can we say about the causes of childhood? Recent years have seen a flurry of theory and speculation from a number of perspectives. Some of the most prominent are reviewed below. Sociological Model Emile Durkheim was perhaps the first to speculate about sociological causes of childhood. He points out two key observations about children:

1. the vast majority of children are unemployed, and
2. children represent one of the least educated segments of our society.

In fact, it has been estimated that less than 20% of children have had more than fourth grade education. Clearly, children are an "out-group." Because of their intellectual handicap, children are even denied the right to vote. From the sociologist's perspective, treatment should be aimed at helping assimilate children into mainstream society. Unfortunately, some victims are so incapacitated by their childhood that they are simply not competent to work. One promising rehabilitation program (Spanky and Alfalfa, 1978) has trained victims of severe childhood to sell lemonade.

### **Biological Model**

The observation that childhood is usually present from birth has led some to speculate on a biological contribution. An early investigation by Flintstone and Jetson (1939) indicated that childhood runs in families. Their survey of over 8,000 American families revealed that over half contained more than one child. Further investigation revealed that even most non-child family members had experienced childhood at some point. Cross-cultural studies (e.g., Mowgli & Din, 1950) indicate that family childhood is even more prevalent in the Far East. For example, in Indian and Chinese families, as many as three out of four family members may have childhood. Impressive evidence of a genetic component of childhood comes from a large-scale twin study by Brady and Partridge (1972). These authors studied over 106 pairs of twins, looking at concordance rates for childhood. Among identical or monozygotic twins, concordance was unusually high (0.92), i.e., when one twin was diagnosed with childhood, the other twin was almost always a child as well.

### **Psychological Models**

A considerable number of psychologically-based theories of the development of childhood exist. They are too numerous to review here. Among the more familiar models are Seligman's "learned childishness" model. According to this model, individuals who are treated like children eventually give up and become children. As a counterpoint to such theories, some experts have claimed that childhood does not really exist. Szasz (1980) has called "childhood" an expedient label. In seeking conformity, we handicap those whom we find unruly or too short to deal with by labeling them "children."

### **Treatment of Childhood**

Efforts to treat childhood are as old as the syndrome itself. Only in modern times, however, have humane and systematic treatment protocols been applied. In part, this increased attention to the problem may be due to the sheer number of individuals suffering from childhood. Government statistics (DHHS) reveal that there are more children alive today than at any time in our history. To paraphrase P.T. Barnum: "There's a child born every minute."

The overwhelming number of children has made government intervention inevitable. The nineteenth century saw the institution of what remains the largest single program for the treatment of childhood - so-called "public schools." Under this colossal program, individuals are placed into treatment groups